

Meaning-generating mechanisms and the semiosphere: Towards the semiotics of modern apocrypha

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Abstract. Both ancient and modern apocrypha have already been widely discussed in various fields of academic research, for example in religious, biblical or literary studies. Although such analyses say much about the historical and religious background of apocryphal writings and enable us to discover the depth of the symbolic resources used in such texts, they do not fully reveal the cultural impact of the canon. That is why a broader cultural analysis of both the canon and the apocrypha should be based on different methods of research, such as those that are offered by cultural semiotics. From the standpoint of Lotmanian semiotics modern apocrypha may be viewed as examples of the working of culture. They can be regarded as e.g. creative translation of the canon, tools of cultural autocommunication, memory devices, and meaning-generating mechanisms which dynamize the semiosphere. Semiotic analysis underlines the cultural impact of the canon not only as a set of sacred writings but also as a kind of a “cultural code”. The canon as a paradigmatic cultural text (in Aleida Assmann’s sense) is a powerful meaning-generating mechanism in which a huge number of texts intertextually relate to one another. In such relations hypertexts point out the symbolic (often archaic) nucleus of culture (thus they illustrate the statics of the semiosphere), at the same time describing and/or provoking some cultural changes (due to which they correspond with the dynamic nature of the semiosphere).

Keywords: apocrypha; canon; autocommunication; translation; cultural memory

Introduction

Lotmanian semiotics can serve as an instrument for cultural analysis of modern apocrypha, which are texts that intertextually relate to the biblical canon but perform different cultural, social, aesthetic and pragmatic functions than traditional

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apocryphal texts used to do. Although the problem of both ancient and modern apocrypha has already been widely discussed in the fields of biblical, religious and literary studies, semiotics can still offer a new, refreshing perspective of analysis of the subject by underlining the cultural impact of the canon. Such analyses help to describe modern apocrypha as examples of “workings of culture” and underline the tension between the semiosphere’s statics and dynamics. From the perspective of Lotmanian semiotics modern apocrypha can be seen as:

- an effect of creative translation of the canon;
- tools of cultural autocommunication;
- memory devices;
- meaning-generating mechanisms which dynamize the semiosphere.

Modern apocrypha in outline

Scholars dealing with the phenomenon of the apocrypha often underline the fact that the term used for a description of such an enormously rich set of various texts is vague or blurred. The semantic capacity of the term depends on various factors and even though there are several basic characteristics of those texts, they cannot be treated as satisfying criteria for a clear definition nor for sticking the label of an apocryphal writing to every text that represents those qualities.² Three key aspects of apocrypha are the following:

- (1) Whereas the term commonly refers to a set of ancient texts, in fact apocrypha are of various historical, as well as geographical, origins. A huge number of apocryphal writings were compiled in the second century, but several are even older and have been created before the final collection of canonical texts was set up (or exactly during the process of establishing the canon) (Starowieyski 2006: 11–12). A large portion of the apocrypha have also been created in the Middle Ages and later epochs.
- (2) Further, pseudonymy – which is listed as one of the basic features of apocrypha – can also be found in writings of a non-apocryphal character. As Ryszard Rubinkiewicz, a Polish scholar dealing with apocrypha, notes, one can find pseudonymy even in the Holy Scripture itself (Rubinkiewicz 1987: 11–12). Another scholar working in the field, Marek Starowieyski, stresses the fact that since Antiquity till the Middle Ages the attitude towards the author’s right to his name was rather lax. Thus, pseudonymy has not been treated as fraud; instead, it has been quite a popular writing strategy. The choice of a

² The following passage repeats in a condensed form some more detailed considerations on the “traditional” or ancient apocrypha which I have provided in Jankowska 2019: 18–50, as well as in Jankowska 2016: 10–1 31.

name usually depended on the kind of “spiritual or intellectual relations” of the actual author of a text with the pseudonymic one (Starowieyski 2006: 9).

- (3) While the Greek word ‘*apokryphos*’ means ‘hidden’ and connotes a mysterious character of a text or its availability only for the few, apocryphal writings have been in fact widely known and often read. Starowieyski claims that the Greek term might have been just an imprecise translation of the Hebrew word ‘*ganuz*’ which means ‘excluded [from use]’. The term covers both the process of exclusion of a copy of the Holy Writ because of some physical damage to the text, as well as omission of a text because of its heretical character, i.e. harmfulness (Starowieyski 2003: 21).³

The second meaning is already connected with “being outside of the canon”, even as the idea of the *canon* remains complicated and semantically rich itself. According to Jan Assman – who analyses the cultural impact of the processes of canonization of some texts – the Greek word ‘*kanon*’ originally meant ‘a clue’, ‘a criterion’, ‘a measure’, ‘a model’ and ‘a paradigm’. This was meant to imply the idea of perfection (J. Assman 2011: 90–91) and connoted, in the sphere of social life, accuracy and faithfulness (symbolized by four strategies or figures: a witness, a scribe, a messenger, and a contract). Assmann notes that in the further process of theologization, the canon reveals new meanings: not only the above-mentioned perfection, but first of all holiness and – because of its sacred character – completeness, closure and inviolability (J. Assmann 2011: 100).

Most of dictionary definitions of apocrypha are based on the criterion of non-canonicity, with the distinction between the understandings of the canon depending on the confession. Thus the relation to the Holy Scripture is treated as crucial, e.g. in the following definitions:

- (1) Christian religious texts that are related to the Bible but not officially considered to be part of it.⁴

³ Similar remarks are to be found in the work of Merav Mack and Benjamin Balint who note that *genizah* served as both a protection for the sacred writings and a means of the concealment of the heretic ones: “Guided by Judaism’s reverential regard for – and fidelity to – the dignity to a written word, many Jewish communities, even now, keep a *genizah*, or repository of discarded sacred texts, where the manuscripts gather dust or disintegrate. Such repositories, often in synagogue attics or cellars, hold anything bearing the name of God, texts with scribal errors or physical damage, or sometimes anything written in Hebrew characters. These storerooms have functioned both to protect a text’s sanctity and to hide heretical texts. They conceal both the sacred and the censored. The Hebrew word *ganuz*, in fact, like the Arabic *janaza* (funeral), suggest burial, and later evolved to connote concealment.” (Mack, Balint 2019: 122)

⁴ Oxford Dictionary [https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/american_english/apocrypha].

(2) (a): books included in the Septuagint and Vulgate but excluded from the Jewish and Protestant canons of the Old Testament,

(b): early Christian writings not included in the New Testament.⁵

Despite the multiplicity of definitions, many scholars underline that the term is debatable. One scholar has noted that “the problem of the definition of the term apocrypha remains unsolved” (Starowieyski 2006: 7), while other researchers emphasize the “enormous semantic richness of the term” (Adamczyk 1980: 13). Some scholars claim that apocrypha should rather be treated as a kind of a “cultural and linguistic convention” and an “open, dynamic, and historical structure” than as a sharply defined genre (Tomaszewska 2015: 21). Umberto Eco (1994: 174) notes that

[...] the definitions of such terms as “fake”, “forgery”, “pseudepigrapha”, “falsification”, “facsimile”, “counterfeiting”, “spurious”, “pseudo”, “apocryphal”, and others are rather controversial. It is reasonable to suspect that many difficulties in defining these terms are due to the difficulty in defining the very notion of “original” or of “real object”.

Since there are so many problems with the sharp definition of apocrypha referring to the ancient texts (or so-called traditional apocrypha), how can one begin to describe the modern apocrypha?

The term will obviously remain vague, but one can try to list at least a few common features of texts which may be labelled as modern apocryphal writings.

First of all, modern apocrypha make use of the contents of the Bible. This feature seems quite evident, but it should be noted that it narrows the meaning of the term. This is because many academic understandings of apocrypha suggest a wider semantic scope, including variations on genres, vocabularies, stylistics, etc. (Szybowicz 2008: 9; Szajnert 2000: 137). Such understandings – connecting apocrypha with a wide range of intertextual games – are said to be subversive (or at least confrontational) to theological definitions and focused on deeper layers of meanings by using the “full etymological and semantic potential of the term” (Szajnert 2000: 138). Even though such an understanding has a great heuristic potential for wider literary studies, I would prefer to narrow the term ‘modern apocrypha’ so that it would embrace a set of texts in which the content of the Bible is used (Jankowska 2019: 46–50). However – and this is of crucial importance – the inspiration for such texts is not limited to the Holy Writ: intertextually, they refer also to a wide scope of other cultural texts (not only literary ones), e.g. to ancient apocrypha, various mythologies, classic literature, theological treatises

⁵ Merriam-Webster Dictionary [<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apocrypha>].

(both orthodox and heretical, on various historical, geographical and denotative/religious backgrounds), texts of popular culture, historical investigations, etc. Thus, from this point of view modern apocrypha refer to the canon perceived not only as a set of sacred writings as Jan Assmann (2011: 100-101) defines it, but also as a collection of cultural texts including, for instance, literary classics, which is the meaning of the term proposed by Aleida Assmann (2008: 100–101, 2013: 35–38). However, the reference to the Holy Writ is still the basic one.

A Polish scholar working in the field of literary studies Ryszard Nycz discusses what he calls “a principle of apocrypha”, which is a kind of a “re-creation of a pattern”, a “false copy of a non-existing subject”, “imitation without the model”, falsification *ex nihilo*, and – what is important – an imitation of interpretation, which means playing with the rules of reception (Nycz 1993: 179, 182). In my opinion, modern apocrypha employ that strategy in various ways. They re-create narrative patterns of the canon (and some other cultural texts). Sometimes, being complicated textual palimpsests, they play with both existing and non-existing (but intratextually constructed) hypotexts. Finally, they often deceive readers and defy their expectations and the above-mentioned rules of perception. Using this strategy, modern apocryphal writings remain just stylizations, literary works⁶ which do not aspire to be “holy writings”. Thus, they do accept the closure and completeness of the canon even though they often criticize religious worldviews, values and norms. It should be stressed that modern apocrypha, which are mere stylizations, do not relate to the category of Truth: not only do they not function as a new Revelation, but neither do they pretend to be any proper historical investigations, even though some of them use elements of historical writings or sometimes create an author-figure who is said to be a kind of a discoverer or a historical investigator (Jankowska 2019: 45). In an intertextual play of dis/covering the truth such texts reveal neither any “actual events” from the past nor “the real Gospel”, “the true word of God”: if they pretend to discover anything at all, it is “the false character” of the Holy Writ, “the forgery of the Bible”. This strategy has been used in several apocryphal writings which are oriented towards an intertextual mode of tropics/counter-writing; while “unmasking the religious fraud”, they do not offer any ultimate, universal Truth in return.

⁶ I narrow the understanding of the term to literary works only, but it needs to be noticed that there is a set of texts of a more “religious character” which are also known as modern apocrypha (e.g. *The Gospel of the Childhood of Our Lord Jesus Christ* by Catulle Mendès, *The Unknown Life of Jesus Christ or The Tale of Issa* by Nicolas Notovitch, *The Gospel of the Holy Twelve* by Gideon Jasper Richard Ouseley or *The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* by Levi H. Dowling).

Modern apocrypha are connected with the strong authorship model, which is one of the differences between such texts and ancient apocryphal writings. Aleida Assmann notes that the strong authorship mode is usually connected to the genius-figure or at least to the well-visible writer, a creator, the master of literary art, while the opposite stratagem – that of weak authorship – is often based on the figure of a copyist or a scribe hiding behind some authority figure (e.g. pseudonymy). The work of a strong author is stable and inviolable, lasts in history in an unchanged shape, and is often “canonized”, due to which the author becomes a classic. The work of a weak author is more “flexible” and vulnerable to re-writing or defragmentation (A. Assmann 2012: 67–72).

Modern apocrypha employ various intertextual strategies, and a large number of them relate architextually to both the canon and ancient apocrypha. According to Gerard Genette (1997: 4) architextuality is

[...] a relationship that is completely silent, articulated at most only by a paratextual mention, which can be titular (as in *Poems, Essays, The Romance of the Rose*, etc.) or most often subtitled (as when the indication *A Novel*, or *A Story*, or *Poems* is appended to the title on the cover), but which remains in any case of a purely taxonomic nature.

Some of the modern writings of the discussed type include in the title or subtitle the words ‘gospel’ or ‘apocrypha’ (e.g. *Gospel According to Jesus Christ* by José Saramago, *The Gospel According to the Son* by Norman Mailer, *The Gospel According to Pilate* by Eric Emmanuel Schmitt or the Polish novel *Oswojone. Apokryf o Jezusie Chrystusie dla tych, co nie boją się ryzyka* [*The Apocrypha on Jesus Christ for those who are not afraid of the risk*] by Mirosław Maliński). Intertextual relations of this sort emphasize codes which are basic for a hypertext, program the mode of reception, play the role of an introduction to the stylization and strengthen the apocryphal character of a given text. Paratextual relations such as “prefaces, postfaces, notices, forewords”, which “provide the text with a (variable) setting and sometimes a commentary” (Genette 1997: 3), ensure the credibility of the text or guise its authenticity, e.g. by the author’s commentary on his/her historical, biblical, etymological investigations. These are said to be the basis of the work and create an image of the author as a “researcher” or a discoverer (e.g. Historical Commentary in *King Jesus* by Robert Graves or the author’s final explanations complete with a short glossary full of historical and etymological investigations in *A Man of Nazareth* by Anthony Burgess).

In texts of this type all three modes of intertextuality discussed by Renate Lachmann, i.e. tropics, participation and transformation, are employed. The first

one means counter-writing, based on the strategy of the reversal of the original content, the second one renewed writing, connected to the strategy of a (creative) repetition, and the third one re-mixing, defragmentation or bricolage, often of an ironic or esoteric character (Lachmann 2009: 310–311).

Modern apocrypha as intertextual variations on the canon and on other hypotexts are polylingual textual palimpsests created by using multiple codes and various semiotic resources and play various cultural roles. Thus, from the perspective of semiotics of culture, such texts can be treated as examples of some “workings of culture”.

Modern apocrypha and the semiosphere

The Lotmanian idea of the semiosphere helps to understand the tension between the statics and dynamics of culture. As a semiotic space which is necessary for the existence of any language, semiosphere still cannot be limited to the sum of languages functioning in it. It is a heterogeneous and dynamic structure, filled with multiple languages and subsystems that relate to one another in a wide spectrum: from complete mutual translatability to an absolute incompatibility of codes. As Lotman (1990: 125) writes, “heterogeneity [of the semiosphere] is defined both by the diversity of elements and by their different functions”. Every semiotic system is based at least on binarism and assymetry, but – what is crucial – binarism is a principle realized in plurality as new languages still keep appearing and “every newly-formed language is in its turn subdivided on a binary principle” (Lotman 1990: 124). According to Lotman, every culture is based on some counter-mechanisms: of multiplying languages and of their unification (Lotman 1990: 124). The huge number of languages leads us to the second above-mentioned characteristic of the semiosphere: asymmetry that “finds expression in the currents of internal translations with which the whole density of the semiosphere is permeated. Translation is a primary mechanism of consciousness” (Lotman 1990: 127). As various languages functioning in the semiosphere do not have mutual correspondences, which means that they are semiotically asymmetrical, the whole space should be seen as a huge generator of information (Lotman 1990: 127).

Semiosphere has a centre and a periphery, as well as boundaries which separate it from what is considered as “chaos”: a non-semiotic environment, barbarians, non-culture or something unstructured, which in fact is often just another semiosphere structured along the same principles (Lotman 2017: 100). In the centre of the semiosphere, there are the most developed languages. At its heart is the natural language of a given culture occupying the most prominent place

(Lotman 1990: 127). In this nucleus of the semiosphere one can find the most important, influential and well-established languages, while in the periphery there are several other languages, “partial languages” or “half-formed systems” which are also vehicles of information, but are not so valuable for the given culture or are even regarded as non-existent (Lotman 1990: 127).

When a semiosphere reaches a high level of development, the process of its self-description begins. As Lotman (1990: 127) writes, “this is the stage when grammars are written, customs and laws codified”. While the process is necessary to maintain the unity of the structure, it also leads to a sort of conservation, whereby the dynamics and flexibility of the semiosphere are weakened (Lotman 1990: 127). It is important to note that the self-description is rooted in the centre of the whole structure, and that its relations to the semiotic reality and the so-called real life are much more complex than it appears on a metalevel. In fact, it is a kind of idealization, and what seems to be a norm in the centre is not necessarily a norm at the periphery. Also a lot of other languages, texts and subsystems are marginalized or treated as non-existent while in fact they function outside the nucleus of the given structure and, as it is still a dynamic construct, can later appear in the centre and influence the self-description which needs to change, because, as Lotman (1990: 129) writes: “[...] points of view change and ‘unknowns’ suddenly occur”.

Applying these ideas to the phenomenon of modern apocrypha, one could say that the canon is placed in the centre of the semiosphere, being the cornerstone of the system of religion and, as such, of identity of a culture constructed in the self-description. At the same time apocryphal narratives can be seen as products of peripheries, due to which they may be marginalized not only on the metalevel of description but in real life as well (for example they may be treated as heretical, blasphemous, offensive or nonsensical texts). In fact, so-called traditional or ancient apocrypha have often been the literature of the outskirts. Starowieyski notices that cultural centres such as Rome, Antioch or Constantinople produced such texts less often. He stresses that apocrypha were also connected to religious ideas if not openly heretical, then at least *marginalized* in the Christian world (Starowieyski 2003: 50). Modern apocrypha are much more closely connected to some influential ideas developed in philosophy, history, and science, serving as a kind of a documentation of multiple cultural shifts. At the same time they are still not of the same cultural and social value as the canon which can be regarded as a “paradigmatic cultural text” (A. Assmann 2013: 30), i.e. the text which is formative for a given cultural structure and the reading community. As more controversial documents, proposing certain new religious (or counter-religious), political and social views, apocrypha can be regarded as peripheral messages which dynamize

the semiosphere. Seen as avant-garde or harmful at some historical moments, they can move close to the centre of a given semiosphere over time and reflect or even provoke cultural changes.

The existence of texts of this sort shows that self-description of a given culture is idealistic and unifying in character, while the semiotic reality of a structure is much more complex: there are several competitive languages and texts in a given semiosphere, representing various religious, social, political or philosophical views and ideas. Apocryphal narratives transcend the canon, which can still be seen as one of the central semiotic resources, but at the same time they often remain subversive towards the original biblical ideas, values and norms, being rhetorically oriented towards those new cultural, social or axiological constructs which are more or less marginalized at a given moment in history. They dynamize the semiosphere not only by revealing semantic potentials hidden in the hypotext and by generating brand new meanings in the process of transcoding or translating the canon, but also by being the vehicles of new ideas which can later appear as influential and powerful, such as atheism or religious syncretism. Apocryphal texts illustrate the complex character of a structure in which various languages exist. What is more, sometimes they can also be regarded as products of intercultural communication, being influenced by texts and meanings coming from outside of the semiosphere to which they belong.

Modern apocrypha and the creative translation of the canon

According to Lotman, the informational function of a text is not its only, and maybe even not the most basic, function because a semiotic structure focused on that end would lose its capacity of being a meaning-generating mechanism (creative function) and of serving as a “memory device”, which are its two other important roles. Lotman (1990: 12–13) underlines the fact that

[f]or a fairly complex message to be received with absolute identity, conditions are required which in naturally occurring situations are practically unobtainable: addressee and addresser have to have wholly identical codes, i.e. to be in fact semiotically speaking a bifurcation of one and the same personality; for a code includes not only a certain binary set of rules for encoding and decoding a message, but also a multi-dimensional hierarchy. Even the fact that both participants in the communication use one and the same natural language [...] does not ensure the identity of code; for there has to be also a common linguistic experience, and an identical dimension of memory. And to this must be added the common understanding of norm, linguistic reference and of pragmatics. If one then takes into account cultural traditions (the semiotic memory of culture) and

the inevitable factor of the individual way with which this tradition is revealed to a particular member of a collective, then it will be obvious that the coincidence of codes between transmitter and transmittee is in reality possible only to a very relative extent. It follows then inevitably that the identity of the transmitted and received texts is relative.

Thus, due to the informational function, there is no “ideal” communication because all the participants of the act use multiple codes for both encoding and decoding a given message. The semiosis increases and new semantic potentials of a message are revealed. The same factors influence the process of translation:

The very fact that one and the same poem can be translated by different translators in many ways testifies to the fact that in place of a precise correspondence to text T1 in this case there is a certain space. Any one of the texts t1, t2, t3 . . . tn which fill this space may be a possible interpretation of the input text. Instead of a precise correspondence there is one of the possible interpretations, instead of a symmetrical transformation there is an asymmetrical one, instead of identity between the elements which compose T1 and T2 there is a conventional equivalence between them. (Lotman 1990: 14)

This is why every act of translation is creative and a text which has been produced in such a process should be seen as a new one (Lotman 1990: 14). What is crucial here is that Lotman discusses various forms of translation: not only from one natural language into another, but from one semiotic system into another as well.

I think that Lotmanian ideas can be applied to the phenomenon of modern apocrypha, which from that point of view should be seen as products of the creative translation of the canon: a translation from the sacred into the profane, from the past into the present, from one cultural, social and historical environment into another. This process elicits numerous semantic potentials of the original canonical content, even in those forms of intertextual relations which are based on counter-writing. The new apocryphal text retroactively reveals further layers of signification, bringing out the meaning-generating power of both the hypo- and the hypertext.

Some modern apocrypha based on the re-writing strategy (e.g. *Jesus, the Man who was God* by Max Gallo, *A Man of Nazareth* by Anthony Burgess or *The Gospel according to Pilate* by Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt) can be seen as a translation of the canon from the past into the present: they serve as an attempt of “revitalizig” the original content and as a way of adjusting the “archaic” message to a new historical context. Such texts try to “hide” some original meanings as too obsolete, bringing out those that, according to the intention of a hypertext, could be seen as

more fitting to modern times. Thus modern apocrypha based on the strategy of participation often focus on evangelical virtues as a core of a re-written hypotext, trying to translate the original message from the past into some rhetorically re-constructed “modern days” which are said to be distanced from the vision of the punitive God, from the idea of blemish or from the concept of hell. The “outdated” religious ideas are “covered” or “hidden” (or at least marginalized) and the “positive message” of love, forgiveness and compassion is brought to light. Such texts often relate to the synoptic gospels and base the message on the so-called “theology from below”: starting with the figure of the man Jesus, with all his human weaknesses, they finally get to the figure of Christ, the Son of God. By doing so, such texts are focused more on a kind of biblical “anthropology” than on religious or philosophical issues which still remain crucial for the canonical content (such as e.g. creation, embodiment, Judgement Day etc.).

On the other hand, modern apocrypha based on the strategy of counter-writing (e.g. *The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ* by Philip Pullman, *The Gospel according to Jesus Christ* by José Saramago or *The Gospel according to the Son* by Norman Mailer) can be regarded as translations from the sacred into the profane. As Giorgio Agamben (2006: 93) notices, profanation connotes the regaining by human beings of what has been lost in favour of God(s). In this case, the original content of the canon is translated into the language of rationalism, philosophy or science; Jesus becomes just a man, but a man endowed with extraordinary oratorical skills; sometimes he is presented by means of some philosophical or cultural codes older than the hypertext, but considerably younger than the canon, becoming a paragon of virtue, a sage or even a revolutionary, which are ideas taken from the 18th- and 19th-century philosophical and political imagery (Sesboüe 2003: 43–80). Some miracles known from the canon are translated into the language of science: described as optical illusions or misinterpretations provided by uneducated witnesses of the events, as religiously or politically motivated forgery, or as psychological phenomena. Besides, the texts often transcode some historical investigations or use ideas from the field of the so-called three Quests for the historical Jesus (which are connected with theological considerations as well as historical research). Apocryphal counter-writing uses the canonical codes to present counter-canonical narratives, ideas and meanings, trying to regain “the message” by its desacralization.

Modern apocrypha based on the strategy of transformation (e.g. *Issa: The Greatest Story Never Told* by Lois Drake, *King Jesus* by Robert Graves or *Mary of Nazareth* by Mark Halter) can be treated as adaptation of the canon to new religious views or translation into the language of some kind of “natural” or “universal” religion by means of multiple codes taken not only from the main

hypotext but from other religious and philosophical systems as well. Often being of an esoteric, mysterious or ludic character, the texts bind together various semiotic resources: Judaism and Christianity as well as Hinduism, Buddhism, New Age, popular culture, science, etc. In this way, they try to reveal some “hidden layers” of the canon, pointing out some elements common for different traditions and sacred texts, and, in a very apocryphal gesture, “discovering the Truth”.

Such creative translations do not only support the semiosis and dynamize the semiosphere but also bring to light what stays in the centre of the structure. As instruments of autocommunication they illustrate the tension between the statics and dynamics of culture: new meanings do not erase the old ones; on the contrary, due to the process the latter remain vital, if only by the use of the biblical codes.

Modern apocrypha and cultural autocommunication

Lotman discusses two basic communicative systems: the classic one, based on the ‘I–s/he’ channel, and the autocommunicative one realized in the ‘I–I’ channel. In the first mode information is transferred in space, in the second one in time. Both refer to the individual as well as the cultural level. Lotman (1990: 34–35) notes:

For culture to exist as a mechanism organizing the collective personality with a common memory and a collective consciousness, there must be present a pair of semiotic systems with the consequent possibility of text translation. The ‘I–s/he’ and ‘I–I’ communicative systems form just such a pair (by the way we should mention that a seemingly universal law for human cultures is that one of the members of any culture-forming semiotic pair must be natural language, or include natural language). Actual cultures, like artistic texts, are constructed on the principle of pendulum-like swings between these systems. (Lotman 1990: 34–35)

Thus, both models appear in every culture, but usually one of them is dominant, shaping the characteristics of a given structure.

In the classic mode the ‘I’ is the possessor of information, the subject, and ‘h/she’ is the recipient, the object of a communication act (Lotman 1990: 21), while in the autocommunication mode the addresser and the addressee remain the same but are transformed in the communication process. In the ‘I–s/he’ model the code and the message remain invariable, in contradiction to the ‘I–I’ system in which, by introducing the second, supplementary code, the message gains the features of a new one as “the ‘I–I’ system qualitatively transforms the information, and this leads to a restructuring of the actual I itself” (Lotman 1990: 22).

Modern apocrypha can be seen as an illustration of cultural autocommunication as they refer to the basic semiotic resources, to the set of texts crucial for a discussed semiosphere. Creatively translating it or, in the terms used by Lotman for a description of the 'I-I' channel, introducing a supplementary code in the process of the re-writing of the canon, they may lead to the restructuring of the subject of the process, to the transformation of the culture itself. Lotman (1990: 22) claims that

while communicating with him/herself, the addresser inwardly reconstructs his/her essence, since the essence of a personality may be thought of as an individual set of socially significant codes, and this set changes during the act of communication. The transmission of a message along the 'I-I' channel is not a self-contained process since it is caused by the intrusion of supplementary codes from outside, and by external stimuli which alter the contextual situation.

As has already been mentioned, the model of autocommunication refers not only to an individual human being, but can be related to the whole structure as well (Lotman 1990: 21). A highly developed culture needs to project its self-description, but this need for a self-metaview is also strengthened by contacts with other semiospheres (or other cultures). To repeat, a boundary of a semiosphere works as a kind of a membrane of limited permeability, thus some new texts or languages can come to the semiosphere from outside and influence its character. New texts can be assimilated in a five-stage operation (Lotman 1990: 144–145; the process described by Lotman refers mostly to the relations between the centre and the periphery, but can be applied to intercultural relations as well) and, as the final effect of this process, become something which is considered by the receiving structure as its "own". Staying in intensified contact with other cultures, a given one needs to focus on such "workings" which help it to keep its consistency and prevent it from both dissolving in other structures as well as disintegration into separate chronological and spatial layers. Those workings would be the above-mentioned autocommunication and cultural memory.

By using the canonical codes, modern apocrypha constantly put the spotlight on the original content. It is so even in the texts that belong to the counter-writing mode and are attempts to undermine the basic canonical values and norms, if not the whole system, of religion. Not only does the process of typing over the code of the canon illustrate its validity for a given cultural system but it also serves as a tool of its constant vitalization as well. Re-writing of the Holy Writ does not mean that a culture stays close to the system of religion, but it certainly shows the importance of religious narratives for shaping the roots of the culture, roots which need to be remembered if the whole structure is to stay coherent.

Autocommunicative potential of modern apocrypha can be achieved in either of two ways: as a re-writing of the canon (which is regarded as a message transferred in time) or as a use of the canon as a code. Lotman (1990: 34) writes:

Consider the paradoxical situation we find ourselves in with regard to the study of folklore. We know that folklore has provided the firmest evidence for structural parallels with natural languages and that linguistic methods have been applied to folklore with the greatest success. In fact the researcher will find in this field a defined number of elements in the system and comparatively easy rules for their combination. But here we must point out also a profound difference: language provides a formal system of expression, but the field of content remains, from the point of view of language as such, extremely free. Folklore, and especially such forms of it as the magic tale, make both spheres extremely automatized. But this is a paradox. If the text were in fact constructed in this way it would be wholly redundant. And the same could be said of other forms of art oriented on canonic forms, on the fulfilment and not the violation of norms and rules. The answer evidently lies in the fact that if texts of this type at the moment of their inception had a certain semantic value (the semantics of the magic tale evidently was a function of its relationship to ritual), these values were subsequently lost and the texts began to acquire features of purely syntagmatic organizations. While on the level of natural language they obviously have semantic value, on the level of culture, they tend towards pure syntagmatics, i.e. from being texts they become 'codes'. When Levi-Strauss spoke of the musical nature of myth he had in mind this tendency of myths to become purely syntagmatic, a-semantic texts, not records of particular events, but schemas for organizing messages.

Lotman discusses folklore and myth, but one can apply those findings to the canonical narratives as well: from that point of view the canon can be seen not only as a message, but also as a (cultural) code used for creating a new apocryphal (and, what is crucial, polylingual) message.

Thus, the strategy of apocrypha can be seen as an example of cultural inner communication: texts of this type enrich the semiotic life of the canon, and, from a pragmatic point of view since they often employ tactics of heresy, blasphemy or profanation, they draw "public" attention to the roots of culture and to what stays in the centre of the semiosphere, to what is said to be its nucleus. It should be remembered that in such acts of autocommunication culture transforms itself: in this case by revealing a new potential of the canonical texts, by illustrating tensions between various subsystems of the semiosphere (e.g. religion, politics, science), by emphasizing cultural distance from religious narratives, or by expressing new ideas and social norms and values. Autocommunication that refers to the canon also shows the complementarity of statics and dynamics of a structure: attention is brought to the basic source texts, but at the same time new texts and meanings

appear. As Lotman says, autocommunication is not the same as redundancy (Lotman 1990: 23, 29).

Modern apocrypha and cultural memory

According to Lotman (1990: 27) there are two kinds of autocommunication, “those with a mnemonic function and those without”. I think that modern apocrypha represent the former type as they refer to the canon, and the canon is based on the use of symbols,⁷ which serve as memory devices.

A semiotic system without a definition of a symbol is incomplete. As there is no commonly accepted meaning of the term in academic discourse, Lotman (1990: 103) proposes to start with some basic ideas “that our cultural experience intuitively gives us, and then try to generalize”. From that point of view, a symbol “involves the idea of a content which in its turn serves as expression level for another content, one which is as a rule more highly valued in that culture”. Further, Lotman (1990: 103) distinguishes a few characteristics of a symbol: (1) it may be easily isolated from its semiotic surrounding as it has clear boundaries; (2) it is always a text on both the expression and the content level; (3) it always contains “something archaic”; (4) as a finalized text it does not need to be included in any syntagmatic chain; but (5) when it becomes its part, it does not lose its semantic and structural independence. Last but not least, (6) a symbol “never belongs only to one synchronic section of a culture, it always cuts across that section vertically, coming from the past and passing on into the future. A symbol’s memory is always more ancient than the memory of its non-symbolic text-context” (Lotman 1990: 103).

Modern apocrypha relate to the semiotic resources of the canon, making use of one of the most influential kinds of symbols: the religious ones. As Lotman notices, symbols are “mnemonic programs” which transfer complex texts in condensed forms and preserve ideas and meanings in time and space, helping a given culture not to lose contact with its origins. Thus, as tools of autocommunication, apocrypha play an important role of memory devices: by the mnemonic power of symbols they use, they also become an instrument of remembering (Jankowska 2022: 141–142).

What is crucial is that this kind of remembering is an active one. Aleida Assmann makes a distinction between active and passive remembering: the former type is connected with engagement, constant use, and semiotic vitality, and

⁷ This article synthesizes some considerations on the Lotmanian idea of a symbol provided in Jankowska 2022.

its basic medium is the canon, while the latter one is connected to the medium of an archive, where texts, things and meanings just wait to be used and become vital again. Being connected to the canon by its creative translation, transcoding and re-writing, modern apocrypha also highlight a paradigmatic character of the Bible as a cultural text: a text which is not only a medium of memory but its object as well (A. Assmann 2008: 97–98).

According to Lotman, a symbol has a dual nature. On the one hand it shows its repeatability and invariancy by travelling through time as “an emissary from other cultural epochs (or from other cultures), a reminder of the ancient (or eternal) foundations of [...] culture” (Lotman 1990: 104). As a kind of a semiotic container of (archaic) meanings essential for a given structure it is perceived as something different from new textual surroundings. On the other hand, a symbol may be easily included in a new semiotic, historical or cultural context. “Its invariancy is realized in variants” (Lotman 1990: 104); thus, by inclusion in a new context a symbol not only transforms it, but is transformed by it in a reciprocal manner. That is exactly the mechanism working in modern apocrypha: the new textual (as well as historical, ideological etc.) context in which canonical symbols appear does not overrule their basic, original, root meanings. The new apocryphal environment is transformed by the use of symbols: even the counter-writing mode, subversive towards the canonical (religious) content, brings to light those basic, “archaic” meanings (Jankowska 2022: 142). That is why modern apocrypha play a mnemonic cultural role. On the other hand, canonical symbols are also transformed by the new apocryphal context and reveal new meanings as “the changes which the ‘eternal’ meaning of the symbol undergoes in the given culture highlight the changeability of the context” (Lotman 1990: 104).

One can notice the role modern apocrypha play as tools of *active* remembering: they *make use* of what is given to remember, so that the canon remains vital as a semiotic resource. This does not mean that its original religious values and norms are as vital as the text itself. The canon can be treated as a cultural text – one of the basic cultural grammars or vocabularies – rather than as a holy narrative. Still, modern apocrypha can help a culture to remember its origins, even if rhetorically they postulate a distance from originally religious views and from archaic social, political, economic and cognitive models present in the canon (Jankowska 2016: 22–23).

Conclusion

From the semiotic point of view modern apocrypha can be regarded as various examples highlighting some of the workings of culture, such as creative translation; autocommunication; and collective remembering (cultural memory). As texts that make use of the basic semiotic resources connected to the “roots of culture” reconstructed in cultural self-description they may serve as tools which prevent the culture from disintegration into separate layers or from self-oblivion. Using such “archaic” resources, they (purposefully or not) support what is said to be the nucleus of culture. Hence, they work in favour of the statics of culture. On the other hand, by bringing to light further semantic potentials of the canon and by connecting the canonical code with other codes and languages, they work as an instrument of cultural dynamics. They both illustrate and provoke some cultural and social changes, showing that a culture that remains close to its roots need not be petrified, or even conservative in character.

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Mechanizmy generowania znaczenia a semiosfera: w stronę semiotyki współczesnej apokryficzności

Zarówno starożytne, jak i współczesne apokryfy zostały już dogłębnie omówione w rozmaitych obszarach badań akademickich, takich jak przykładowo religioznawstwo, bibliistyka czy literaturoznawstwo. Choć analizy te mówią wiele o historycznych i religijnych uwarunkowaniach powstawania tekstów apokryficznych, a także skupiają uwagę na głębi zasobów symbolicznych w nich wykorzystywanych, to jednak nie wypuklają w pełni kulturotwórczej roli kanonu. Stąd też szersze analizy kulturoznawcze winny być oparte na innych jeszcze metodach i perspektywach badawczych, takich jak przykładowo te, które oferowane są przez semiotykę kultury.

Z punktu widzenia semiotyki Łotmanowskiej apokryfy współczesne mogą być odczytywane jako przykłady pewnych mechanizmów kultury – mogą być zatem postrzegane jako, między innymi, efekty twórczego przekładu kanonu, narzędzia kulturowej autokomunikacji, narzędzia mnemotechniczne oraz mechanizmy generowania znaczeń, które dynamizują semiosferę. Analizy semiotyczne wypuklają kulturotwórczą rolę kanonu nie tylko jako zbioru świętych tekstów, lecz również jako swoistego kodu

kulturowego. Kanon jako paradygmat tekstu kulturowego (A. Assmann) stanowi potężny mechanizm generowania znaczeń, do którego odnosi się intertekstualnie ogromna ilość tekstów. W tych relacjach hiperteksty nie tylko nieustannie wskazują na symboliczne (nierzadko archaiczne) jądro kultury, ilustrując tym samym to, co statyczne w semiosferze, lecz również opisują i/lub prowokują pewne zmiany kulturowe, odnosząc się tym samym do tego, co w semiosferze dynamiczne.

Tähendusloome mehhanismid ja semiosfäär. Nüüdisaegsete apokrüüfide semiootika poole

Nii antiik- kui ka nüüdisaegseid apokrüüfe on juba laialdaselt käsitletud erinevates akadeemilistes uurimisvaldkondades, näiteks religiooni-, piibli- või kirjandusteaduses. Kuigi sellised analüüsid ütlevad paljugi apokrüüfiliste kirjutiste ajaloolise ja religioosse tausta kohta ning võimaldavad avastada neis tekstides kasutatud sümbolsete vahendite sügavust, ei ava need täielikult kaanoni kultuurilist mõju. Seetõttu peaks nii kaanoni kui ka apokrüüfide laiem kultuuriline analüüs põhinema teistsugustel uurimismeetoditel, nagu neid pakub näiteks kultuurisemiootika.

Lotmani semiootika seisukohalt võib tänapäevaseid apokrüüfe vaadelda kui näiteid kultuuri toimimisviisidest. Näiteks võib neid pidada kaanoni loominguliseks tõlkimiseks, kultuurilise autokommunikatsiooni tööriistadeks, mäletamise vahenditeks ja tähendust genereerivateks mehhanismideks, mis lisavad semiosfäärile dünaamikat. Semiootiline analüüs rõhutab kaanoni kultuurilist mõju mitte ainult pühakirjade kogumina, vaid ka omamoodi "kultuurikoodina". Kaanon kui paradigmaatiline kultuuritekst (A. Assmanni mõttes) on tõhus tähendusloome mehhanism, millega on intertekstuaalselt seotud tohutu hulk tekste. Sellistes suhetes viitavad hüpertekstid kultuuri sümbolsele (sageli arhailisele) tuumale (seeläbi illustreerivad need semiosfääri staatikat), ühtaegu kirjeldades ja/või algatades kultuurilisi muutusi (mistõttu need on vastavuses semiosfääri dünaamilise iseloomuga).